



Lanterns on the temple grounds in front of the Buddha Hall

Historical background – The Kamakura period

The Kamakura period is one of the most interesting times in Japanese history. Kamakura was the home town of the first shogun Minamoto no Yoritomo. Here, he set up his government, the bakufu (幕府) or shogunate, in 1192. This was the beginning of a 700-year rule of the shogun in Japan. While the emperor was still in place, the true military and therefore political and economical power lay in the hands of the shogun. From 1203 onwards, the shogun's family lost its power to their retainers, the Kamakura shikken (執権). This office was held by the Hōjō family.

The political and everyday life was characterized by the rise of the samurai and the establishment of the feudal system. The Samurai warrior class also invented the ritual suicide “seppuku” or “harakiri” (切腹 / 腹切).

As for religion, two new Buddhist sects were on the rise – Jōdo, also called Pure Land Buddhism and Zen Buddhism. After individuals like the regent Hōjō Tokimune studied and practiced Zen, the school of Buddhism became very popular in the higher warrior classes. The focus on the mind, the reduction to the essential, and the self-discipline required from the practitioner appealed very much to the members of the warrior class and influenced their self-concept considerably.

In Kamakura, Zen became popular. The first pure Zen temple in Kamakura, the Kenchō-ji, was founded by emperor Go-Fukakusa in 1253.



Kamakura Period
鎌倉時代
1192-1333

Minamoto no Yoritomo
源 頼朝
1147-1199

Shikken
執権
powerful regents that controlled the politics behind a puppet shogun

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